

Espionage, continued

The spy who muffed it

Yet another buffoon from Britain's security services went to prison last week. Mr Michael Bettaney's secret trial earned him a total of 23 years on 10 charges, and provoked both a torrent of abuse from the judge and a preposterous nineteenth-century Marxist statement from the convicted man (through his defence lawyer) on behalf of the "rights, interests and

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I'm a sshpy, occifer

aspirations of the broad masses of our people, without whose labour by hand and brain etcetera. . . .

This silly fellow, a fairly senior counter-espionage officer with MI5, was not even competent to get in touch with the Russians. He kept pestering one of their

officials, a Mr Gouk, with offers of highly sensitive material, including samples of what he had to offer. Mr Gouk would not take the hint, Mr Bettaney was arrested last September when about to leave for Vienna, in the hope of finding a more willing purchaser among the Russians there. It is conjectured that the Russians, faced with such an absurd approach, simply rang the foreign office to complain about what they thought must be a provocation to entrap them.

So a new type of disaffected Briton makes his appearance. Instead of the languid intellectuals who used to be regarded as natural traitors, we now have a self-made, working-class intellectual whose peculiarity at Oxford (not even Cambridge, these days) was to have worn neat suits and short-cropped hair in the late 1960s: that really made him stand out. He joined the air cadets, took up dogmatic religion, then became interested in Nazism and got more than conventionally drunk. A spell teaching in Germany was his apprenticeship for spying—a necessary one, if (like the British security services) you absorb most of your

techniques from Mr John le Carré.

The real oddity is not Mr Bettaney's sudden conversion from Nazism to a rigid Marxism—fervent believers often reach suddenly for new certitudes when an old one gets damaged—but why the security service recruiters took such a man on, and why they kept him once his personality had collapsed to the point where he was convicted for being drunk and disorderly in a London street. He apparently actually shouted to the policeman who arrested him: "You can't arrest me, I'm a spy".

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